

***Guns, Guerillas, and the Great Leader: North Korea and the Third World***

Benjamin R. Young (Stanford University Press, 2021) 335 pages, illustrations.

***Reviewed by Yong Suk Lee***

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The phrase Third World, coined by French demographer Alfred Sauvy in 1952, is viewed as antiquated and has largely been replaced with phrases like developing world. Before falling out of favor, however, Third World was a label that newly independent nations themselves embraced for a time. It was supposed to represent a continuing path toward diplomatic independence from legacies of colonialism—a third way, instead of adhering to the bipolar model of the Cold War world. Benjamin R. Young, professor of history at Virginia Commonwealth University, in his first book dives into North Korea’s adventures in third worldism and breaks new ground, chronicling a period in international history when other nations looked up to North Korea as a role model.

Since the armistice ended the Korean War in July 1953, the two Koreas have waged a diplomatic war for legitimacy, each trying to claim the title as the sole legitimate Korea. For the international community in 2022, this war for legitimacy has long been over. North Korea is a pariah: a hereditary communist dictatorship with nuclear weapons. South Korea is a G-20 country, exporting cars, TVs, cell phones, and pop culture around the world. This was not always the case. In the 1960s and 1970s, North Korea was frequently touted as a Third World role model. With an infusion of Soviet aid after the Korean War, the North rebuilt quickly and founder Kim Il Sung solidified absolute control.<sup>a</sup> South Korea, on the other hand, was mired for years in poverty, political instability, and military coups.

Beyond cement, machinery, and pre-fabricated statues, North Korea was most interested in exporting revolution. Young shows that Kim Il Sung, an anti-Japanese partisan fighter who saw himself in another revolutionary fight against the United States, prioritized relations with other revolutionaries that he saw as his brothers in arms, such as Ho Chi Minh, Fidel Castro, and Che Guevara.

In the end, Young makes a compelling case that the Kim family helped other revolutionaries to help themselves, and North Korea’s foreign policy toward the Third World echoes the old adage that all politics are local.

Although preaching internationalism and global unity among progressive and revolutionary forces, Pyongyang’s adventurism in the Third World was rooted in its competition against Seoul and the desire to rid the world of imperialist forces, especially the US military presence on the Korean Peninsula. Instead of finding an independent path for nonaligned nations during the Cold War, for North Korea the Third World became an off-Peninsula venue to continue to fight the Korean War. For example, we now know that in the skies over North Vietnam, the Korean People’s Army Air Force 1967–69 lost 14 personnel killed in action and claimed 26 US aircraft shot down.<sup>b</sup> Young cites a conversation, in an account found in Romanian Foreign Ministry archives, between a North Vietnamese official and a Romanian diplomat to clarify North Korea’s military objectives in Vietnam. “The North Koreans had plenty of people active in South Vietnam. They are active in those areas where South Korean troops are operating, so as to study their fighting techniques, combat readiness and morale of the South Korean Army, and to use propaganda against the South Koreans.” (69)

Young notes that North Vietnamese leaders appreciated North Korea’s consistent support for their cause but avoided requesting direct military assistance. They finally acquiesced in 1967 and asked for air assistance, in an effort to level the playing field against the United States. While the team of North Korean pilots and ground crew left Indochina in 1969, the North’s intelligence cadre remained active in South Vietnam until 1972, waging a proxy war against the South until at least 1971. (69)

The Vietnam experience between the two Koreas is a little known episode. South Korea took an active role in

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a. There are multiple ways to romanize Korean. In this review, we employ the convention used by Dr. Young.

b. Merle Pribbenow, “North Korean Pilots in the Skies over Vietnam,” North Korea International Documentation Project, E-Dossier #2, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, November 2021.

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the Vietnam War. From September 1964 to March 1973, the South sent some 350,000 troops to Vietnam, with 5,099 killed in action and 10,962 wounded, according to official accounts. North Korea was an early supporter of the North Vietnamese cause and volunteered to send troops and material support independent of South Korea's involvement, driven by desire to support a revolutionary fight against the US. These appeals to provide troops took on more urgency when South Korea started sending troops to support the US and South Vietnam and started winning battlefield accolades. It is not clear why Hanoi resisted Pyongyang's troop offers and Young does not explore the subject. An informed observer could surmise that Vietnamese officials had little interest in hosting a proxy war in their backyard or that Moscow, Hanoi's primary military backer, vetoed Pyongyang's proposal.

Once North Vietnam opened the door, North Korea took full advantage of its foothold in Indochina. "The North Korean intelligence cell in South Vietnam produced and disseminated more than one million propaganda leaflets directed at South Korean troops, provided Korean language lessons to Vietcong soldiers, helped the Vietnamese Communists kidnap South Korean soldiers, broadcast Korean-language propaganda on the radio, and conducted data research and radio monitoring of South Korean armed forces." (69) Young further concludes the "Vietnam war presented a unique opportunity for Kim Il Sung to evaluate South Korea's military without directly engaging them in an all out war on the Korean peninsula. The Vietnam war served as a useful litmus test for the North Korean military and intelligence." (70)

North Korea's Third World foreign policy by the end of the Vietnam War was more about guns and guerrillas than cultural exchanges and trade. Young shows that, even as a nation-state, the North's ideology was firmly rooted in the founding myth of a guerrilla dynasty and North Korea as a nation of revolutionaries in a perpetual battle against capitalists and reactionaries, as represented in the form of the United States and its ally South Korea. This proxy war reached all the way to the Middle East. According to Young, "from 1963 to the early 1990s, the DPRK covertly trained fighters from the Palestinian liberation movement and supplied them with weapons. (173) North Korea's material supported included the Abu Nidal Organization and Muhammad Da'ud Awa, one of the planners of the attack against Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics. (171) In the end, Pyongyang

overreached in its perceived fight against the US and South Korea abroad, and Young blames Kim Jong Il for finally turning off the Third World against the North.

When North Korea's current leader Kim Jong Un first came on the scene as his father's heir apparent, he was known as the Young General of the Korean Revolution. This was not the first time this moniker was used to describe a Kim family member. The first Young General in North Korean propaganda was Kim Il Sung's son Kim Jong Il, Jong Un's father. As a Young General taking the battlefield, Kim Jong Il sought military honors and he found them in the Third World, waging war against the South. Young notes that "Kim Jong Il's version of diplomacy prioritized revolutionary violence as the key to undermining the ROK's legitimacy and paving the way to his succession as the next leader of the DPRK." (144)

Kim Jong Il is widely credited with orchestrating two bloody attacks against South Korea that resulted in the North being listed as a state sponsor of terror and sent Pyongyang's international reputation on a downward spiral. North Korean agents planted a bomb at the Aung San Martyr's Mausoleum in Burma on October 9, 1983, in an attempt to assassinate the visiting South Korean President Chun Doo Hwan, killing four Burmese and 16 South Korean dignitaries and reporters. On November 28, 1987, two North Korean agents planted a bomb aboard Korean Air Lines (KAL) Flight 858 that was flying from Baghdad to Seoul. The agents planted the bomb and deplaned during a refueling stop in Abu Dhabi. The plane blew up over the Andaman Sea, killing all 115 people aboard, many of them South Korean construction workers returning from Iraq. Afterward, the State Department in 1988 listed North Korea as a state sponsor of terrorism.

North Korea still denies involvement in the attacks but suspects were quickly apprehended after both incidents. The Burmese military pursued three North Korean suspects who had arrived in Burma the month before aboard a North Korean merchant ship. One was killed during a firefight with and two were captured. The two agents responsible for the KAL bombing were apprehended in Bahrain. Both tried to commit suicide by poison capsule; one died, and the survivor was extradited to South Korea for trial. Young argues that the two attacks combined dealt a fatal blow to North Korea's global campaign for legitimacy against the South. Even the most ardent

supporters of the regime overseas found it difficult to defend Pyongyang's behavior.

Within Pyongyang's world view, terrorist attacks that made North Korea a pariah nation probably were considered successful. From Kim Jong Il's perspective, they had struck a blow against South Korea and by extension the United States and earned him battlefield accolades in a field of combat other than war. The goodwill the North accrued decades before as a leader in the Non-Aligned Movement and a supporter of revolutionary movements was squandered to help solidify the political legitimacy of an heir-apparent. In his final analysis, Young shows

that North Korea's Third World diplomacy was provincial instead of international. Instead of finding an independent third way to navigate the bipolar world, Pyongyang was obsessed with gaining a perceived advantage in the Cold War on the Korean Peninsula.

Professor Young's first book is a welcome addition to the international history of Korea. It is insightful, engaging, and shines a light on a topic frequently discussed among students of Korean history but covered only in obscure academic journals, and a book-length study in English was long overdue.



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